THE TRUTH ABOUT THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Not Signed on July 4, as Popular Tradition Has It, but on August 2, Asserts Gaillard Hunt of the Library of Congress---He Relates Actual History of the Famous Document

THE popular, traditional idea of the signing of the Declaration of Independence presents it as a graceful and formal function, taking place July 4, 1776, in a large, handsomely furnished chamber in Independence Hall, Philadelphia. To give the necessary touch of vivacity to the picture there is the scene of the small boy darting from the door as the last signer sets his autograph to the parchment and dashing down the street, calling to his grandfather to "Ring! Oh, ring for liberty!"

As a matter of fact the Declaration of Independence was signed behind locked doors, and was not generally signed upon the Fourth of July. The city was not breathlessly awaiting the event outside, nor did the Liberty Bell peal forth on that day the triumphal note of freedom. These are some of the interesting things about the Declaration which were pointed out in an interview by Gaillard Hunt, chief of the division of manuscripts in the Library of Congress.

"There is really no reason for our celebrating the Fourth of July more than the second of July or the second of August," said Dr. Hunt. "It was not until the latter date that the document was generally signed.

"The peregrinations of the Declaration of Independence make an interesting story, and few people have followed them. You know, of course, that the fundamental philosophy of the Declaration of Independence is almost purely Virginian. George Mason of Fairfax county, one of the greatest of our early statesmen, had for years been promulgating the doctrine of independence.

"The Fairfax County Resolves, of which Mason was the author, were adopted July 18, 1774, in Alexandria, then the county seat of Fairfax. These resolutions were twenty-six in number and, as written by Mason, were unanimously adopted. This was absolutely the first clear and emphatic statement of the rights of the colonies.

"The Virginia Bill of Rights, of which George Mason was also the author, was drawn up and adopted in the last Colonial Assembly in Virginia prior to the Revolution. The bill of rights is in effect a part of every Constitution in the land to-day.

"It is beyond doubt that this famous document, of which his elderly friend was author, was largely drawn upon by Thomas Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson referred to Mason, who was his close friend, as 'a man of the first order of wisdom, of expansive mind, profound judgment, cogent in argument, learned in the lore of former constitution and earnest for the republican change on democratic principles.'

"The fundamental principles of government set forth in Mason's bill of rights were the same as those in the English petitions to the King, the acts of the Long Parliament and Magna Charta.

"You know perhaps that it was another Virginian, Richard Henry Lee, who presented to Congress on June 7, 1776, a set of resolutions containing the words, 'That these united Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.' These resolutions by Lee, favorably although not unanimously voted upon, contained the initial declaration of independence of the American Colonies and were the precursor of that more formal instrument framed a few days later by Thomas Jefferson.

"It was as a result of the favorable voting upon Lee's resolutions that the well known committee composed of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston was named to draft the document. The committee assigned the task of preparing the instrument to the Virginian. Jefferson's was a master political mind and it was by no mere chance that he was called upon to write the document.

"Thomas Jefferson was the personification of method and immediately upon receiving his commission to write the Declaration he retired to the two rooms he rented as a working place at Seventh and Market place, Philadelphia, and prepared to give his country one of the greatest monuments of human freedom.

"You may remember, too, that Jefferson was fond of having his working tools made exactly to suit his needs. Certain it is that he had a carpenter make the simple table desk for his writing room.

"On this desk he penned the Declaration of Independence and it is now the treasured possession of our State Department, although actually at this moment in San Francisco, having been sent there as part of the Government's exhibit at the exposition."

"How did this desk come into possession of the Department of State?"

"Jefferson left it to his grandson, Joseph Coolidge. The latter bequeathed it to his son, the late T. Jefferson Coolidge of Boston, who presented it to President Hayes, the latter turning it over to the Department. There is absolutely no doubt as to the authenticity of this relic, as the Department owns a letter in Jefferson's handwriting which gives the history of the desk as follows:

"'Th. Johnson gives this writing desk to Joseph Coolidge Junr. as a memorial of affection. It was made from a drawing of his own by Ben Randall, cabinet maker of Philadelphia, with whom he first lodged on his arrival in that city in May, 1776, and is the identical one on which he wrote the Declaration of Independence. Politics, as well as Religion, has its superstitions; these, gaining strength with time, may one day give imaginary value to this relic, for its association with the birth of the Great charter of our Independance.

"'Monticello, Nov. 18, 1825.'

"The Department of State also owns the first draft of the Declaration which Jefferson presented to the committee for its approval. His confreres made a few alterations, which are clearly shown in the text, and Jefferson has written beside each change the name of its author, making the document of inestimable value. Of this first corrected draft he naturally made a fair copy for presentation to Congress.

"While the rough draft submitted to the committee is safe in the hands of the Government, it is to be deeply regretted that the copy which he made for presentation to Congress, and which bears the Congressional amendments and alterations, is lost.

"The latter is the formal Declaration of Independence laid before Congress on June 28, 1776. It was then read and ordered to lie on the table until July 1.

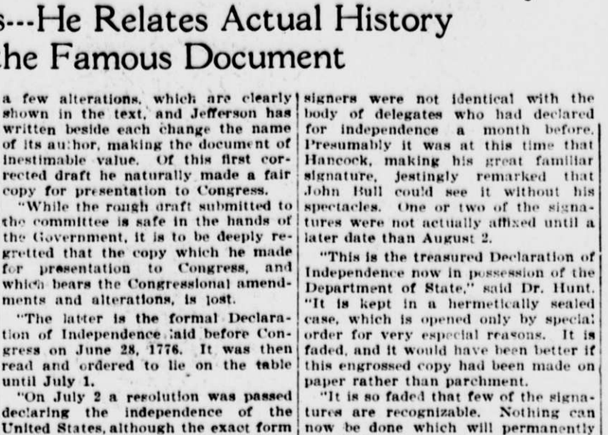
"On July 2 a resolution was passed declaring the independence of the United States, although the exact form of the proclamation as prepared by Jefferson was debated upon until July 4, when, with some alterations and amendments, it was signed by John Hancock, President of the Congress, and the signature attested by Charles Thomson, secretary of Congress.

"July 2 was actually the date of separation of the Colonies from the mother country. On July 3 we find John Adams, whom Jefferson called the 'colossus of the contest,' writing to his wife, Abigail, in the following words:

"'Yesterday the greatest question which was ever debated in America was decided, and a greater perhaps never was nor will be decided among men.'

"In a second letter written the same day, he said: 'But the day is past. The 2d of July will be the most memorable epoch in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the day of deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.'

"There is little doubt but that the participants in the event considered the 2d of July as the true date of independence for the Colonies, but popular fancy seized upon the 4th, the date of acceptance of Jefferson's formal and detailed setting forth of the demands of the colonies, as the proper date of celebration.



Desk on which Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, property of Department of State.

"The history of the paper is not generally known and it is of interest. It was fully discussed, and several changes, merely verbal, were made in the draft before John Hancock set his signature upon it on the evening of July 4.

"Jefferson referred somewhat caustically to his friend Richard Henry Lee on the events of these first days of July, crucial to him because of the discussions and changes suggested and made in his precious document. The discussion, he used to relate, might have gone on interminably at any other season of the year.

"But the weather was oppressively warm and the hall in which the deputies sat was close to a stable, 'whence the hungry flies swarmed thick and fierce, alighting on the legs of the delegates and biting hard through their silk stockings. Treason was preferable to discomfort.'

"John Trumbull's famous painting of the scene, hanging in the rotunda of the Capitol, is a poetical piece of work and gives many of the portraits of the signers with faithfulness, but it is somewhat fanciful. No silken hangings draped the windows of that stifling room on July 4, 1776, and the beautiful order in which the men are ranged up for signing the immortal document is also fictional.

"The president of the Congress, John Hancock, with the secretary, Charles Thomson, alone signed the autograph Jefferson document on that date. Immediately afterward it was hurried to the official printer for Congress, John Dunlap, to put in type, and several copies were made.

"By next morning the printed copies of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence were in Hancock's hands. When he came to write the proceedings of July 4, 1776, into the Journal of Congress Charles Thomson, secretary of the Congress, left a blank space for the Declaration, and it is this broadside which now appears wafered into the space left for it in the Journal. Jefferson's penned copy of the Declaration was doubtless sent as 'copy' to the printer and it is probable that it was not returned with the printed duplicates, as there is no record of it ever having been seen again.

"This broadside was sent out to the Governors of the States, to the Continental army, and it is the paper from which the Declaration of Independence was read to the people July 8, when the Liberty Bell was rung and the first public celebration was made in honor of the event."

July 19. Congress ordered that the Declaration passed the 4th be fairly engrossed. It was very beautifully done on parchment. This is the document which received the signatures of all the members of the Continental Congress present in Independence Hall August 2, 1776.

By this time, however, the membership had changed slightly, so that the signers were not identical with the body of delegates who had declared for independence a month before. Presumably it was at this time that Hancock, making his great familiar signature, jestingly remarked that John Bull could see it without his spectacles. One or two of the signatures were not actually affixed until a later date than August 2.

"This is the treasured Declaration of Independence now in possession of the Department of State," said Dr. Hunt. "It is kept in a hermetically sealed case, which is opened only by special order for very especial reasons. It is faded, and it would have been better if this engrossed copy had been made on paper rather than parchment.

"It is so faded that few of the signatures are recognizable. Nothing can now be done which will permanently benefit it. It could be temporarily restored by the use of acids, but these are temporary aids, and when consulted in regard to it I advised leaving it as it is. It will last longer so.

"I believe the main cause of the fading was the impression taken in 1823 by order of President Monroe. Two hundred facsimiles were then made to give a copy to each of the then living signers and others. Taking the impression removed the ink.

"One of the facsimiles is framed and hangs in the library of the State Department directly above a portion of Jefferson's first penned draft submitted to the committee and containing their autograph changes.

"These two documents show the public with sufficient accuracy the actual processes of the instrument, which was the verbal declaration of a group of early American cotemporaries whom Gladstone declared were unequalled in the history of the world. However we view it, it furnished the most dramatic incident in American history."

Jefferson's note identifying the desk now in the possession of the Department of State. From original manuscript.

PERSONAL SACRIFICES MADE BY THE SIGNERS

THE thirty-ninth man to sign the Declaration of Independence was Charles Carroll of Maryland. He was lean and undersized.

It was the second day of August, 1776. The Declaration of Independence, having been copied on parchment, lay upon the desk of the Secretary of Congress.

"Will you sign it?" John Hancock asked.

"Most willingly," Carroll answered.

"There goes a few millions," a bystander said—millions meaning specie, lands, live stock and other property—as the scratching of the quill was heard on the document.

Five years before Samuel Chase, also of Maryland, exclaimed to Carroll, in his robust style: "We have the better of our opponents; we have completely written them down."

"Do you think that writing will settle the question between us?" Carroll asked.

"To be sure; what else can we resort to?" Chase replied.

"The bayonet," Carroll answered.

Chase, the son of a learned and famous clergyman, was 30 years old. "The bayonet" turned his thoughts from essays and pamphlets to the sword. It was not long before the Mayor and Aldermen of Annapolis described him in scorn as "a busy, restless incendiary, a ringleader of mobs, a foul mouthed and inflaming son of discord and faction, a common disturber of the public tranquillity and a promoter of the lawless excesses of the multitude."

Lovers of liberty called him the Demosthenes of Maryland when they heard him cry out: "By the God of heaven, I owe no allegiance to the King of Great Britain!" Chase's name is the third one above Carroll's on the Declaration of Independence. And so the day of the bayonet had dawned.

At the close of the war President Washington made Samuel Chase an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States.

Men of standing and of property, men with much to lose, brought on the Revolution. The rebels were not the rabble of the thirteen colonies. Washington, Jefferson and Carroll were rich. They lived in mansions and their furniture and clothing were bought in Europe. Carroll had been educated in Great Britain and France.

Men of the same type in the North wrote their names on the Declaration, wrote, as George Read of Delaware remarked, "with a halter around their necks." Wealthy William Ellery, the Rhode Island lawyer, "determined to see how they all looked as they signed what might be their death warrant," stood beside Charles Thomson, secretary of Congress, and "eyed each closely as he affixed his name to the document. Undaunted resolution," so runs his record, "was displayed in every countenance."

It was William Ellery who during all the disasters of the bitter days that followed concluded every speech he made to the starving colonists by saying: "The Lord reigneth," words caught up nearly a century later by James A. Garfield when, facing a mighty throng of maddened men bent on avenging Lincoln's death, he said, "God reigns and the Government at Washington still lives."

On the day that Robert Morris signed he was the wealthiest and greatest merchant in Philadelphia. He purchased goods in England and sold them here at a large profit. His ships were on the ocean. He had a hothouse and an icehouse, the first in America. No price he might have asked would have gone unaccepted or unpaid by the British Government.

In the same city of Philadelphia was wise, frugal, industrious and opulent Benjamin Franklin, whose fortune and whose life went into jeopardy at his signature. He was 70 years old when he put his name among the fifty-five other rebels and invited poverty and a felon's death. "We must be unanimous," John Hancock urged; "we must all hang together."

"Yes," Franklin answered, pen in hand, "or most assuredly we shall hang separately."

Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, but John Adams passed it through Congress—he was its floor leader, the manager who sent Samuel Chase to Maryland and Dr. Rush through Pennsylvania for the purpose of creating public sentiment.

Adams was 41 years old at the time the Declaration was adopted by Congress. He was saving a competence from his earnings as a lawyer and was writing his wife, Abigail, to be economical for the sake of their children and themselves. A man of established position and great promise, with a fortune growing under his hand, he was no less an enemy of England than was Samuel, the other Massachusetts Adams, "the poor gentleman," as he was known at home and among his colleagues in Congress.

The Lees likewise were rich—Francis Lightfoot and Richard Henry—the former almost idly so, with a great landed estate worked by slaves, but he signed. The resolution leading to the Declaration was written by Richard Henry Lee as early as Friday, June 7.

A British captain of marines at the head of a company of men broke into Lee's house during the night. Lee was to be arrested as a traitor to the King and imprisoned, if not hanged. He was saved, however, by the quick intelligence of his negro servants, who told the British captain that their master had returned to his duties in Philadelphia.

The sessions of the Congress had been held in secret. No reports of the debates were ever made. Hancock's for nearly a month was the only name officially made known to the public. But the British were aware of the fact that Richard Henry Lee had written the resolution declaring "these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States."

The persecution of the signers, though they did not sign until August 2, began at once. The penalties visited upon the leaders who made the Declaration of Independence possible and who gave it form and substance were no greater than those inflicted upon every member of Congress.

The thirteen children of Honest John Hart fled from their home in New Jersey to escape a troop of Hessians. Their mother was too ill to be moved and soon died, but happily in her own house. John Hart, an old man, hunted in woods and hills, never stayed twice in the same place at night and once slept in a kennel with a dog. His large farm was pillaged and his live stock driven away.

A British army was encamped near his estate and a British sloop was at anchor a short distance from his house when Lewis Morris of New York, a wealthy man and a graduate of Yale, wrote his name on the parchment among the rest. His forest of more than a thousand acres was cut down or burned, his mansion was ruined and his family had to flee for their lives.

The Livingstons Philip, his wife and children—colonial aristocrats, went into hiding. William Floyd hurriedly sent his family to Connecticut. His mansion on Long Island was occupied by a troop of cavalry and his horses, cows, sheep and swine were confiscated. This man lost all use of his landed estate for seven years.

In the South Thomas Heyward, who had been educated in England and had travelled in Europe, suffered in person and property. He was wounded and imprisoned and 130 of his slaves were taken along by the British.

Arthur Middleton, a graduate from one of the colleges at Cambridge, a cultivated and much travelled man, was made a prisoner. The furniture in his house was destroyed and the paintings on his walls, purchased in Europe, were cut to pieces.

And there was Richard Stockton of New Jersey, a Princeton graduate and lawyer. He was arrested, thrown in jail, deprived of food and so ill treated that he never fully recovered his health. His papers and library were burned and his farm laid in ruins. Indeed he was so impoverished that he had to borrow money with which to buy bread. Dying, he begged his children to remember that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."

The only Welshman among the signers was Francis Lewis. His signature cost him the whole of his rich estate. An alien by birth and an importer, he was as ardent for liberty as was the poorest native American in the list.

Every signer suffered. Most of them, it should be remembered, were men of property. Many of them belonged to what in these days would be called the plutocracy. Twenty-seven of them were graduates from European or American colleges. There was not an ignorant man among them.

Twenty-five had travelled in Europe. Twenty-four were lawyers in good practice. Thirteen were wealthy farmers. Nine were merchants. Five were physicians, one of whom was Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, "who esteemed," as a contemporary of his has said, "the poor his best patients, for God was their paymaster."

Nor were the signers emotional youths bent on war and adventure. Their average age was 43 years and 10 months. "And every one died," some one has said, "without a stain upon his honor or his character." All but eight of the fifty-six were born in America. Two were natives of England, two of Scotland, three of Ireland and one of Wales.

The men of wealth, in addition to those who have been mentioned, included Thomas Nelson of Virginia. He lived in fine style, hunted foxes in season with his pack of hounds and rode daily to his plantation, a black man accompanying him with a fowling piece. He gave all of his property to the cause of liberty and left his wife in poverty.

Another Virginian, Carter Braxton, owned four large farms. His crops were corn and tobacco. Ships, sailing from the wharf near Mount Vernon, the home of Washington, took his tobacco to England and brought back books, plate, wines, clothing and furniture. Nevertheless he signed. Still another Virginian was Benjamin Harrison, who inherited three fortunes and owned lands, mills, vessels and a shipyard.

Joseph Hewes of North Carolina was a very prosperous importer. The Revolution drove him out of business. William Paca's estates in Maryland were near the British lines and exposed to instant reprisals. George Wythe of the same colony, was rich and had been luxurious, indolent and convivial. At the age of 30 he changed the manner of his life and at 50, when he signed, was a famous lawyer. Two young men who studied in his office became Presidents of the United States and another became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

There were great men, as well as rich ones, in the ranks of the signers. Pointing to Roger Sherman, the Connecticut shoemaker, jurist and legislator and the father of nineteen children, Thomas Jefferson said: "There is a man who never said a foolish thing in his life."

"We are not ripe for a declaration of independence," a conservative man said during one of the sessions of the Congress that soon after passed Richard Henry Lee's momentous resolution.

"In my judgment, sir," exclaimed a six footer at his side, with a Scotch burr on his words, "we are not only ripe but rotting."

And as that the speaker, John Witherspoon, president of Princeton, had only been in this country for eight years. His farm also was plundered and ruined. He lived through his losses and dangers, however, and at 70 wedded a young lady of 22. The other Scotchman who signed was James Wilson, a wealthy Philadelphian and the leader of the Pennsylvania bar—tall, big voiced and near sighted, the small lenses of whose spectacles were set in a huge silver frame.

"Yesterday," John Adams wrote on the 5th of July to Abigail, his wonderful wife, "the greatest question was decided that was ever debated in America; and greater, perhaps, never was or will be decided among men."

"It ought to be solemnized," he added, "with pomps, shows, games, guns, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of the continent to the other from this time forward forever."

Too weak to lift his head from the pillow, dying at the age of 90, John Adams was asked on the Fourth of July, 1826, for a sentiment. "Independence forever," he said, and those were his last words.

Thomas Jefferson, writer of the Declaration.

Above—John Hancock, the first signer.

Independence Hall.

Richard Henry Lee, author of the Liberty resolution.

Above—John Adams, who manœuvred the resolution through Congress.

John Trumbull's painting of "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence" in the rotunda of the Capitol at Washington.